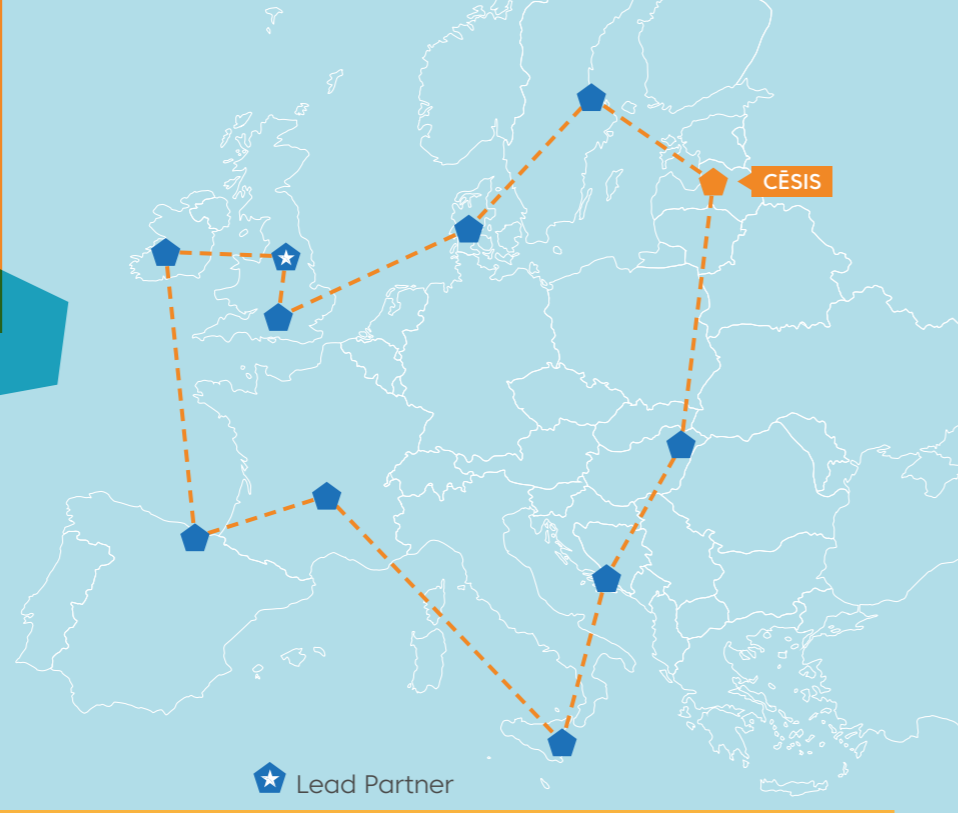


DIGITAL TRANSITION STARTS YOUNG

Key information

- Location: **Cēsis (Latvia)**
- Population: **18 065**
- Involved in URBACT network: **TechTown**
- More information: <http://urbact.eu/techtown>



By working closely with schools, universities and businesses, local authorities in the historic town of Cēsis have made major steps to boost digital education and entrepreneurship.



Meeting with the digital people

While Estonia has been styled the “Digital Republic” by *New Yorker* magazine, Cēsis lies 85 km to the south of Latvia – a country that relies on more traditional industries such as high quality metalworking. This capacity is buoyed by the strengths of Latvia’s education system, particularly in technical subjects. Cēsis is something of an anomaly in that, as a beautiful historic town set amid forests and lakes, it has relied on tourism and services for many of its jobs. Yet like many towns in Latvia it suffered during the recent economic crisis from losing young people to internal and international migration.

Comparing Latvia’s prowess in digital entrepreneurship with that of its northern neighbour, Evija Taurene, Chief

Planner in the Cēsis district municipality says, “Part of Estonia’s success in the digital sector is because of bold and innovative national governance, and we are in no way competing with Tallinn or Tartu. There are also things to learn for local actions, mainly regarding business support.” Of all the benefits of the URBACT TechTown network, it was this emphasis on creating a local network that proved to be most useful in Cēsis. Their transnational workshops in Tallinn (EE) emphasised mapping existing and ideal ecosystems of entrepreneurship – and imagining how to move from one towards the other.

Super-inspirational

“Being the smallest town in the network, it was not always easy to see how the innovative actions our partner cities were implementing would translate to our local context. But the URBACT experience has definitely been super-inspirational for us, and our town is quite ambitious!” says Evija Taurene. Several initiatives that Cēsis saw in partner cities ended up in the impressive Action Plan for Digital Growth 2022 which emerged from their participation in TechTown. Particularly useful were the ‘We Code Cabin’ camp from Barnsley (UK), and the ‘Digital Toddlers’ programme from the Loop City

“The URBACT experience has been super-inspirational for us, and our town is quite ambitious!”

Evija Taurene

cluster of municipalities around Copenhagen (DK). “Of course, many activities that have started already, or will start soon enough, have come from our own ideas and local context. However, it has helped the town identify the need to bolster support.” says Ms Taurene.

One of the key elements that partner cities discovered through TechTown has been identifying stakeholders, some of whom formed an URBACT Local Group to design actions. “We started to organise local digital events and it turned out we have not 10, but over 70 local citizens engaged in the digital economy! For a small town like ours, this seemed unbelievable,” says Ms Taurene. This process was aided by the establishment of the creative and digital industries centre, Skola6, in Cēsis in September 2015, just as TechTown was launched. Although this was already planned, the network’s investigation into how such centres can provide sustained – rather than fleeting – support to entrepreneurial activities was vital.

Meeting the tech people

Cēsis’ ideas for making the most of Skola6 came very much from their peers in the TechTown project. “Following their example, we decided to jump into the unknown and throw an event in order to find an opportunity to meet the community in person. Three local meet-ups have been organised, bringing together more than 50 individuals interested in the digital economy,” says Ms Taurene.

Community building events will also help to put Cēsis on the map in Latvia, and eventually – they hope – the Baltics,

as a place where tech events happen – no small ambition given Estonia’s strengths in the field. “We hope that this might create interest both from local non-tech people to explore new career opportunities, and also draw a new public – future citizens – to Cēsis,” adds Ms Taurene.

Digital education

Having mapped ecosystems for supporting digital entrepreneurship, ultimately the URBACT Local Group looked to education as the primary lever for change and improvement. In their Action Plan for Digital Growth 2022, the town make clear their dedication to education. Cēsis is fortunate to be home to a branch of Riga Technical University. However, the group wanted to prioritise the very young. “We wish to improve access to digital learning opportunities for all citizens, [regardless of] their age group. TechTown partners (especially Loop City in Denmark and Basingstoke in Great Britain) have shown examples of engaging kids in digital education from a really young age,” the document states.

By organising events and discussions, the municipality has managed to put digital education on the local agenda. “Although schools are slow in making changes, they now understand that it is important. Some are even opening up new extracurricular activities and programmes this September,” says Ms Taurene. “Still, we have to fight some of the myths concerning digital education. Some people still think that if kids only sit at the computer, they will forget how to write, read and communicate.”



A meet-up with people interested in digital economy